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Traballo de Fin de Grao

"Killing the Angel in the House": feminism and gender politics in Virginia Woolf

Directora:

Laura María Lojo Rodríguez

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Resumo [na lingua en que se vai redactar o TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]:

The aim of this dissertation is to carry out a feminist approach to the work of Virginia Woolf, exploring the relevance of themes such as gender and feminism in the literary production of this writer. I will focus on the manner in which Woolf conveys her ideas concerning women and literature, and particular attention will be given to those formal and ideological aspects of Woolf's feminist agenda.

In order to serve this purpose, I will depart from a close study of the writer's work, paying special attention to Woolf's essayist production, a genre which she conceives (both from a formal and an ideological standpoint) as the expression of personal opinion and subjectivity, thus radically departing from hegemonic views on the essay as scientific prose, as held by most of her male contemporaries, such as TS Eliot or Desmond MacCarthy. Such a deviation from male traditional standards, along with Woolf's advocation of women's visibility in the public sphere, may account for the ostracism she experienced in her lifetime, especially after the publication of her seminal essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929). However, and as this dissertation aims to show, Woolf's work continues to provide an inspiration for twenty-first-century writers, who write in her wake.

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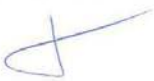	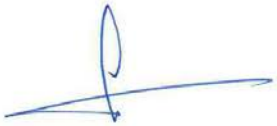	

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Introduction

My decision to choose Virginia Woolf's work as the major focus of this dissertation stems from my own personal interest in her fiction, but also from an admiration for the daring, unconventional attitudes Woolf showed in her own life, at a time when being a woman writer and a passionate feminist could lead to social ostracism. The varied and imaginative strategies which Woolf used to question conventionalisms inspired me in a number of ways. Through the course of the twentieth and twenty-first century, Virginia Woolf moved to the centre of the English literary canon, and her own private life continues to be until this date largely appealing for a variety of reasons, ranging from her complicated personality and mental-related health issues to her unconventional sexuality.

Virginia Woolf is generally regarded as one of the most prominent figures in the so-called modernist literary movement in England. In the twenty-first century, both her life and literary work continue to inspire a great deal of criticism, as shown by the fact that "the number of book-length studies, biographies, dissertations, articles, conference panels [...] continues to flourish" (Rosenberg and Dubino 1997, 1).

Despite the fact that Woolf's popularity seems to increase over the years, most scholars and readers tend to focus on her fiction, and most prominently on her novels. In this dissertation, however, I will focus on Woolf's production as an essayist, which is not only intimately connected with her development as a woman writer, but also explains many of her later formal and ideological achievements. In this sense, it is essential to emphasise that Woolf began her trajectory as a writer in 1904 by producing essays and reviews:

> The towering importance of Woolf's fiction has tended to overshadow the fact that from 1904 to 1922, nearly the first two decades of her professional life as a writer [...] Virginia Woolf was primarily a reviewer and essayist, writing more than half of her 500-plus articles, essays, and reviews. (Rosenberg and Dubino 1997, 1)

Bearing this in mind, it seems reasonable that any account of Woolf's literary career should include not only the novel, which she cultivated at a later period in her life, but also, and most importantly, the essay. Therefore, despite being usually recognised as a novelist, considerable attention should be devoted to Woolf as an essay writer, since this marked the point of inception of her career as a professional writer.

This dissertation also focuses on how Woolf's ideas concerning feminism and gender are first entailed in her juvenile and early essays, which would pave the way for her seminal feminist manifesto, *A Room of One's Own* (1929). As a result, attention will be paid to the way in which the author conveys her views on women and, more specifically, on their position in society and the literary field, in a number of selected essays addressing these topics, in order to later move on to critical examination of *A Room of One's Own*. To serve this purpose, this dissertation will take as its point of inception Woolf's literary beginnings as an essay writer, in particular in the period from 1904 to 1915, and her views on this genre, which departed from traditional conceptions of the essay as scientific prose, as shown in essays such as "The Decay of Essay-Writing" (1905) or "The Modern Essay" (1925), among others.

Moreover, some information concerning Woolf's vision of women's position in literature will be provided, mainly by examining a number of essays, including "Women Novelists" (1918), "Women and fiction" (1945) and "Professions for Women" (1942), which all address the many impediments a woman writer had to face in her determination to be published. Thus, in "Professions for Women", Woolf discussed how, as a woman writer, she had to kill the "Angel in the House", a term which referred to Coventry Patmore's homonymous poem which posed forward an idealised conception of Victorian womanhood in terms of submissiveness, obedience and invisibility. In this essay, Woolf famously explained

how such an idealisation was utterly pernicious for women, since it prevented them from successfully stepping out the private sphere and becoming subjects of their own accord. These essays may be regarded as literary antecedents of key concerns further expanded by the author in *A Room of One's Own*, which contains some of her most innovative ideas about women, which could be related to Woolf's ostracism by some conservative factions of society.

This dissertation is divided into three major chapters: "Virginia Woolf and the Essay", "In Michel de Montaigne's Wake: Woolf and the Common Reader" and "A Woman's Self: Towards *A Room of One's Own*", which explore Woolf's journey from her juvenile essays, first published in 1904, to what is often regarded as a stepping stone both in essay-writing and feminist thought: *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929. "Virginia Woolf and the Essay" focuses on the essay as the genre which enabled Woolf to become a professional writer. In order to fully comprehend the complexity of Woolf's relevance as an essay-writer, it is necessary to examine the writer's personal background, which helped her to establish working connections with several editors and publications, most notably, *The Guardian* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, which encompassed radically different writing experiences for Woolf, as will be argued.

The second chapter, entitled "In Michel de Montaigne's Wake: Woolf and the Common Reader", examines the influence that the French essayist Michel de Montaigne, especially in what pertains to a subjective, personal conception of the genre, which overtly deviated from early-twentieth-century male appreciations of it as an example of scientific, expository prose, as shown by the practice of some of Woolf's contemporaries, most notably, T.S. Eliot, Desmond MacCarthy or John Middleton Murry, exercised on Woolf. Montaigne's conception of the essay as essentially dialogic inspired Woolf into writing outstanding examples in that line, such as "Mr Conrad: A Conversation". By doing so, both Woolf and

Montaigne conceive of the essay as a genre which demands the active participation of the reader, who is asked to engage in a conversation with the author and with the text itself.

This chapter also looks into Woolf's reflections on her practice as an essay-writer, from "The Decay of Essay-Writing" (1905) to "The Modern Essay" (1925), compiled in her seminal collection of essays *The Common Reader* (1925), whose title already encapsulates not only Woolf's target audience - the "common reader" driven merely by pleasure in the act of reading - but also the essay's guiding principles: freedom, subjectivity and pleasure.

The last chapter, entitled "A Woman's Self: Towards *A Room of One's Own*", corresponds to the core of this dissertation. Here the focus will be placed on the most prominent aspects of Woolf's feminist agenda, and on how the writer's main concerns in this regard are expressed in a number of essays, such as "Women Novelists" (1918), "Women and Fiction" (1945) and "Professions for Women" (1942), which show the subtle ways in which Woolf's feminist thought consistently unfolded and crystallised in *A Room of One's Own*. A large section of this chapter looks into the ways in which Woolf articulated her feminist ideas in *A Room of One's Own*, which explores how material conditions explain women's lack of public achievements, thus departing from the essentialist reasons and the biological determinism that most of Woolf's contemporaries showed regarding women's social invisibility. The very title of the essay points in this direction, claiming for women's need to overcome poverty and reclaim a space of their own as the preliminary requirement to write.

1. Virginia Woolf and the Essay

1.1. Woolf as a Professional Writer

The essay as a genre played an extremely relevant role in the life and literary career of Virginia Woolf, since it allowed her to become, in a sense, a professional writer: "making money meant more to her than allowing herself to indulge in household items; it also signified that she was a professional, a real writer" (Dubino 1997, 29). Money and the desire to receive feedback about her writing or, as she herself wrote, "for some one to tell me whether it is well, very well, or indifferently done" (Woolf 1990, 226), appear as Woolf's major concerns as a professional writer, and they are directly related to the essay genre, which enabled her to achieve such means.

The fact that the Stephen family had important connections initially permitted Woolf to begin her literary career as a journalist. Her father, Leslie Stephen, played in this respect a significant role, in that he was responsible for the creation of a domestic environment which encouraged reading and learning (Dubino 1997, 27), as Woolf herself recalls in an essay entitled "Leslie Stephen, the Philosopher at Home: A Daughter's Memories" (1932): "Even today there may be parents who would doubt the wisdom of allowing a girl of 15 the free run of a large and quite unexpurgated library. But my father allowed it" (Woolf 2009, 588).

Nonetheless, owing to her condition as a woman, Woolf was prevented from receiving a formal education – unlike her brothers, who attended Cambridge University – and was privately tutored at home, as was expected of a woman of her social position. This is a fact that Woolf always resented, since she felt it aggravated women's position of cultural inferiority, which she will carefully look into in the first chapter of *A Room of One's Own*.

Despite Woolf's ambivalent relationship with her father, a prominent writer and the reputed editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography* (1885-1901), she was able to work for *The Guardian*, the *Cornhill Magazine*, and the *Times Literary Supplement* largely thanks

to her family's social connections, as already noted (Dubino 1997, 27). However, it must be emphasised that, with the possible exception of F. W. Maitland (who demanded Woolf to write a biography of her father), it was Woolf herself (by then just Virginia Stephen) who had to seek for an editor and take advantage of these acquaintances, as she writes in her diary on July 1927 (Dubino 1997, 28):

> I have worked very methodically and done my due of articles, so that with luck, I shall have made £120 *over* my proper sum by September. That is I shall have made £320 by journalism, & I suppose at least £300 by my novel this year. (Woolf 1982, 149)

Woolf's popularity as an essay writer increased rapidly, in such a manner that:

> In 1905 Woolf did have as much as she could do: she published thirty-five reviews and articles in *The Guardian* and in the *TLS*, *Academy & Literature*, the *Cornhill Magazine*, and the *National Review*. For the following three years she continued to publish an average of thirty reviews a year, and after a hiatus of several years (brought about, in part, by her mental breakdowns), she continued to average thirty reviews a year for the next six years. (Dubino 1997, 29)

Nevertheless, Woolf encountered as a writer many problems in her incipient career, particularly that of censorship while she was working for *The Guardian* from 1904 to 1909 (Dubino 1997, 30). She wished to express herself in a more unrestrained way, as she wrote to Violet Dickinson, one of her closest friends, in July 1905: "If only I could attack the Church of England!" (Woolf 1977, 201). Woolf addresses this issue in "Professions for Women", published in 1942, which will be studied later.

As will be discussed, one of the main characteristics of Woolf's essays is the subtlety and sarcasm with which she addresses some thorny issues, being "A Week in the White House" (1908) a clear case in point. Woolf comments here on a biography of Theodore Roosevelt by William Hale, eliciting a bitter yet masqueraded criticism towards the politician, to the point of claiming that "no one can be confused, or subtle, or malicious

beneath such a torrent of good humour", when she actually means the opposite (Dubino 1997, 30; Woolf 1986, 206).

Woolf would eventually grow tired of the strictures these conventional publishers usually imposed on her, since her writing would be characterised by the search for new forms and the wish to change the way experience was represented (Dubino 1997, 33). Thus, she desired to create "something far less stiff & formal than these Times articles", as she wrote in her diary in November 1931, alluding to her work for the *Times Literary Supplement* (Woolf 1983, 53). In this sense, fiction granted her further freedom: "I am writing for my own pleasure, which is rather a relief after my Guardian drudgery, and I can assail the sanctity of Love and Religion without care for the Parsons morals" (Woolf 1977, 206).

1.2. The Russian Point of View

The period from 1910 to 1915 was highly significant in Woolf's life and career, because her second severe mental breakdown in 1910, shortly after her marriage to Leonard Woolf, brought about a considerable decrease in her production as an essayist (Dubino 1997, 33). Woolf will eventually recover her health, and between 1916 and 1918 she will be offered to review a wide variety of texts, including poetry and some salient foreign novelists such as the Russian writers Chekhov, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky (Dubino 1997, 36). Woolf devotes several essays to these writers, such as "The Russian Background" (1919), "A Minor Dostoevsky" (1917) or "Tolstoy's 'The Cossacks'" (1917).

In "The Russian Background", for instance, Woolf shows her gratitude to Constance Garnett, whose translations of the Russian classics greatly influenced not only herself but a whole generation of writers (Woolf 1988, 83). Thanks to her work, claims Woolf, "we are now not so much at sea when a new translation from the Russian novelists comes our way", being more acquainted with "this strange Russian temperament" (Woolf 1988, 83).

In this manner, translations have rendered Russian authors familiar to the English-speaking reader, who is now more prepared to understand the techniques and modes of narration these writers use in their novels (Woolf 1988, 84) and which will certainly serve Woolf as a model for her own writing. In that sense, Woolf praises the open-endedness of "inconclusive stories", which are "legitimate" because, as she says, "though they leave us feeling melancholy and perhaps uncertain, yet somehow or other they provide a resting point for the mind - a solid object casting its shade of reflection and speculation" (Woolf 1988, 84).

Even though there seems to be no order or coherence in the way some stories, especially those of Chekhov, are constructed, "there is no longer any doubt that whatever Tchehov [Chekhov] chooses he chooses with the finest insight" (Woolf 1988, 84). As Woolf notes, quoting from "The Steppe", Chekhov resembles the peasant in this story, in that he has "'besides the world seen by everyone, another world of his own, accessible to no one else, and probably a very beautiful one'" (Woolf 1988, 84).

In order to comprehend this "world", it is necessary, in Woolf's view, to understand "the background of his thought; for if we can imagine that, the figures in the foreground, the pattern he has wrought upon it, will be more easily intelligible" (Woolf 1988, 84). Thus, in "The Steppe", although this landscape serves as the background for the story, "as the travellers move slowly over the immense space [...] it seems to be the journey of the Russian soul, and the empty space, so sad and so passionate, becomes the background of his [Chekhov's] thought" (Woolf 1988, 85). Woolf finds it remarkable that, despite the fact that the stories included in the book

> […] in their inconclusiveness and intimacy, appear to be the result of a chance meeting on a lonely road [...] these meetings have an intensity, as if shaped by the hand of an artist, which long preserves their significance in memory. (Woolf 1988, 85)

In “A Minor Dostoevsky”, Woolf comments on “the second-rate works” of this writer, in particular *The Gambler*, translated into English by Constance Garnett (Woolf 1987, 165). Woolf appears to admire the way in which Dostoevsky constructs the narrative, where everything seems to be “going at full speed” and where “every scene either ends or threatens to end with an attack of unconsciousness, or one of those inconsequent outbursts into which he falls [...] when the effort to think is too exhausting” (Woolf 1987, 166). Consequently, when the reader finishes any book by this writer, “some new conception of the novelist’s art remains with us” (Woolf 1987, 167), which stands in clear opposition with the boring quality of the realist narratives by Arnold Bennett or John Galsworthy, as Woolf will argue in “Modern Fiction” (1925).

In “Tolstoy’s ‘The Cossacks’”, Woolf highlights the prominence of this author in the Russian literary field, being “hard to imagine that he can ever be surpassed” (Woolf 1987, 77). As if to reinforce this, Woolf deems that novels written in England at the time when “The Cossacks” was published (1863) appear “as the lovable immature work of children compared with the work of grown men”, which demonstrates her high regard for Russian literature (Woolf 1987, 77), as opposed to what she saw as the gloomy panorama of English letters, as she will argue in “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” (1924). Furthermore, “while much of Thackeray and Dickens seems to us far away and obsolete, this story of Tolstoy’s reads as if it had been written a month or two ago” (Woolf 1987, 77).

In this story, as in Chekhov’s, inconclusiveness figures prominently, since “nothing is finished; nothing is tidied up; life merely goes on” (Woolf 1987, 77). Woolf marvels at the writer’s capacity to observe everything, in such a manner that “every gesture seems to be received by him automatically, and at once referred by his brain to some cause which reveals the most carefully hidden secrets of human nature” (Woolf 1987, 77). In this story, Tolstoy pays particular attention to “physical sensation”, allowing the reader “to see the mountains,

the young soldiers, the grapes, the Cossack girls, to feel the firmness of their substance, and to see the bright colours with which the sun and the cold air have painted them" (Woolf 1987, 78).

Moreover, Woolf underscores Tolstoy's ability "to read the minds of different people as certainly as we count the buttons on their coats" (Woolf 1987, 78). Characters themselves also embark on this search, being lonely figures who find the world "never quite satisfactory", which makes Tolstoy's stories unique, in the sense that "they go on indefinitely. It is by their continuous vein of thought that we remember then, rather than by any incident" (Woolf 1987, 79).

All these thoughts on Russian writers will be crucial to understand Woolf's innovative achievement in her own literary production, as shown in the avant-garde narratives she produced in the years immediately after to these reviews, such as the short stories "The Mark on the Wall" (1917) or "Kew Gardens" (1919), which mirror in their nature and composition technique the achievement of the Russian writers whom Woolf so deeply admired.

2. In Michel de Montaigne's Wake: Woolf and the Common Reader

2.1. Michel de Montaigne's "*honnête homme*"

Since a glimpse of Woolf's career as a professional author has already been offered, it may be suitable to provide now a deeper insight of the essay as a genre and, expressly, of how Woolf envisages it. The first point to be made is that essay writing was traditionally a male activity, and this was especially true in Virginia Woolf's time. In this sense, Michel de Montaigne's *honnête homme* was considered to be the "typical essayist", and the essay would be, consequently, "a conversation about men addressed to men", an exclusively male environment, both in its form and content (Sandbach-Dahlström 1997, 275). The canonical

essay is “another nonfiction discourse —comparable to history, political science, or philosophy in which women are not present as subjects but are rendered invisible or marginalized— or even objectified as ‘the other’” (Sandbach-Dahlström 1997, 275).

Virginia Woolf will be strongly critical of this “androcentric discourse”: in an essay entitled “Men and Women” (1920) she condemns this “dance around the gold calf of the masculine ego”, an issue she will bring to the fore in later works such as *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and its sequel *Three Guineas* (1938) (Sandbach-Dahlström 1997, 275). Woolf had been censored and silenced before for intruding in this male-dominated discourse, which encouraged her to use the essay as a didactic tool to raise awareness among women of the need to claim their own space in culture (Sandbach-Dahlström 1997, 276).

In this way, the essay became “a mode of writing well suited to a feminist critique of male culture” due to “the lack of thematic constraints, the indeterminacy, and the self-reflexive nature of the form” (Sandbach-Dahlström 1997, 277). These features are related to the sceptical and exploratory nature of the essay as conceived by Woolf, which means that the genre questions itself about “its own status as a form of art and knowledge” (Sandbach-Dahlström 1997, 278). Similarly to Montaigne, who refuses to assume universal authority on the basis of experience, Woolf writes in the introduction to her first collection of essays, entitled *The Common Reader* (1925), that the volume is “composed of the scraps that make up the amateur critic’s own very personal and makeshift evaluative position” (Sandbach-Dahlström, 278).

Rather than a quest for scientific truth and knowledge, Woolf conceives the essay as a metaphorical voyage of discovery, an image which she consistently uses in essays such as “Reading” (1919) or short stories such as “Monday or Tuesday” (1921). Such metaphorical journeys enable her to explore “her own practice as a writer”, as is the case of “The Elizabethan Lumber Room”, where writing and the voyages of discovery are combined by

the image of lumber, which will eventually become a representation both for Woolf's own essays (characterized by differentiation) and the Elizabethan prose (Sandbach-Dahlström 1997, 277; 279).

Following Montaigne's example, Woolf often refuses to show an objective consistency between the title of her essays and the topic, often apparently unrelated to it (Sandbach-Dahlström 1997, 279). As an example, "Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car", which was published posthumously in *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays* in 1942, but probably written in 1927, is not concerned with geography or light, but with a reflection on the nature of identity and the self, which are, in the author's view, fragmented and multiple (Sandbach-Dahlström 1997, 279).

As already suggested, Virginia Woolf envisages the essay genre "as a vehicle for processes of exploration rather than determinacy", being her essays "a collage of vacillating viewpoints and shifting inconclusive perspectives imbued with their own ironic skepticism" (Sandbach-Dahlström 1997, 280). Woolf, as a result, "tends to write in a way that is consciously exploratory, seeming to move from one point to the next in a tangential fashion rather than to develop logically in the traditional form of an argument" (Luckhurst 1999, 60).

However, the writer seems to acknowledge that this "voyage of discovery" fails to provide answers to certain existential questions, as she admits in "Montaigne" (1925): "But, as we watch with absorbed interest the enthralling spectacle of a soul living openly beneath our eyes, the question frames itself, Is pleasure the end of all? [...] To this what answer can there be? There is none. There is only one more question: 'Que scais-je?'" (Woolf 1994, 78).

In this essay, the author agrees with sixteenth-century French essayist Michel de Montaigne, with whom both her and her father maintained a long reading relationship, that the genre should be void of the didactic nature with which Woolf's male contemporaries imbued the essay: "He [Montaigne] refused to teach; he refused to preach; he kept on saying

that he was just like other people. All his effort was to write himself down, to communicate, to tell the truth" (Woolf 1994, 72). Woolf also recommends "to keep in the middle of the road" and to "choose the common words", which will allow the writer to "communicate a soul" (Woolf 1994, 74, 76).

2.2. The Essay and the Dialogic Form

Woolf's emphasis on the essay as communication of personal experience is linked to Montaigne's *Essais*, often considered to be the work from which the genre originates (Luckhurst 1999, 47). Here, dialogue figures prominently, being used both in the conversations between the different voices that are assumed by the author in the text and in those between the text and the reader himself (Luckhurst 1999, 42).

"Mr Conrad: A Conversation" (1923) illustrates how Woolf adopts the conversational method in her own essays. This is a dialogue between Penelope Otway and David Lowe, an old friend of hers, in which they discuss Joseph Conrad and whether he may be regarded as a classic (Woolf 1988, 376). Whereas Penelope thinks so, David disagrees, comparing him to "an elderly and disillusioned nightingale singing over and over, but hopelessly out of tune, the one song he had learnt in his youth" (Woolf 1988, 376). He believes that Conrad lacks any kind of English humour, in addition to there being "nothing colloquial" or "intimate" in him, which he sees as "great drawbacks for a novelist" (Woolf 1988, 377).

The conversational or dialogic nature of Montaigne's *Essais* is related to the fact that they were formulated as "a substitute for conversation with, and also a memento mori of, Montaigne's friend La Boétie" (Luckhurst 1999, 49), and allowed Woolf to intersect a variety - and often opposing - points of view on a particular subject. The text, therefore, directly addresses its audience, who is expected to react in some way or another and to be willing to

accept digressions instead of dismissing them "as the ramblings of an untidy mind" (Luckhurst 1999, 42), as Montaigne expresses it in his *Essais:*

> Speech is half his who speaks, and half his who hears. The latter must prepare to take it according to the impetus it receives. As with tennis players, he who takes the ball must shift his position and make ready according to the movement of the striker, and according to the nature of the stroke. (Montaigne 1969, 299)

Consequently, Montaigne's proposal simultaneously involves an invitation and a provocation, to which his intended sixteenth-century readership did not respond as expected by the author, who was often regarded as "a moralist and a skeptic" with a deplorable style (Luckhurst 1999, 60). Woolf's outlook of fiction as essentially a tool to communicate is further illustrated in "The Common Reader", where the writer, quoting from Dr Johnson's *The Life of Gray*, claims that

> I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers, uncorrupted by literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours (Woolf 1994, 19)

This "common reader [...] differs from the critic and the scholar" and "reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others" (Woolf 1994, 19). This assertion actually entails Woolf's position of resistance – as a woman and as a critic – with respect to some contemporary male critics (most notably TS Eliot, John Middleton Murry and Desmond MacCarthy) who understood the essay as a means to impart knowledge and to inform the reader's taste, as Eliot argued in "The Functions of Criticism" (1923).

2.3. Towards a New Conception of Fiction: "Modern Fiction" (1925)

In "Modern Fiction" (1925), Woolf expresses her rejection of traditional realism, whose conventions had been, in her view, already exhausted by the proliferation of writers who regarded literature as the mirror of life:

> Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy have excited so many hopes and disappointed them so persistently that our gratitude largely takes the form of thanking them for having shown us what they might have done but have not done; what we certainly could not do, but as certainly, perhaps, do not wish to do. (Woolf 1994, 158)

Woolf establishes a distinction between "spiritualist" writers (Joseph Conrad, James Joyce or EM Forster), who seek to capture the essence or "spirit" of experience, and "materialist" writers, whose aim is to depict the world in a verisimilar manner, thus posing her own particular understanding of a canon of contemporary English letters:

> If we tried to formulate our meaning in one word we should say that these three writers are materialists. It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us, and left us with the feeling that the sooner English fiction turns its back upon them, as politely as may be, and marches, if only into the desert, the better for its soul. (Woolf 1994, 158)

These "realist" authors deal with "unimportant things" and "spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring" (Woolf 1994, 159). Woolf also criticises here editorial pressure and market demands, describing the figure of the editor as "some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant" who constrains the writer and commands him to produce a specific type of narrative (Woolf 1994, 160). Woolf experienced these strictures first-hand at an early stage of her literary career, and this could account for her rebelliousness in this respect, which leads her to ask: "Is life like this? Must novels be like this?" (Woolf 1994, 160).

2.4. “The Modern Essay” (1925)

In what follows I will focus with greater detail on the analysis of Woolf’s conception of the essay in order to complete the picture, which will be done mainly through the attentive reading of “The Modern Essay” (1925). Firstly, the author states that the essay is a living thing and, owing to this, it is unnecessary to investigate its history, as “its present is more important than its past” (Woolf 1994, 216). Even though the essay may take a variety of forms and address a number of topics, there exist certain principles that “appear to control the chaos” (Woolf 1994, 216).

The first of these is “that it should give pleasure”, which is connected with “the common reader” whom Woolf claims to be addressing, who is a member of a particular community of readers who approach literature to obtain pleasure. The essay “should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last” (Woolf 1994, 216). Woolf interrogates both herself and the reader about how this “feat” should be accomplished: “[...] what art can the essayist use in these short lengths of prose to sting us wide awake and fix us in a trance which is not sleep but rather an intensification of life — a basking, with every faculty alert, in the sun of pleasure?” (Woolf 1994, 216). She claims that that is rarely the case, placing the blame equally on the reader and the writer.

In order to achieve this, the essayist should firstly know “how to write”, because the author’s wisdom in an essay “must be so fused by the magic of writing that not a fact juts out, not a dogma tears the surface of the texture” (Woolf 1994, 216). Additionally, “the essay must be pure [...] pure from dullness, deadness, and deposits of extraneous matter” (Woolf 1994, 217).

According to Woolf, Walter Pater’s “Notes on Leonardo da Vinci” would be a good model to follow, because the author has managed “to get his material fused” and to transmit to the reader “a vision, such as we get in a good novel where everything contributes to bring

the writer's conception as a whole before us" (Woolf 1994, 218). However, Woolf warns against "the temptation to decorate", that is, to indulge in excessive ornament, as eighteenth-century writer Stevenson does, whose "peroration has the sort of insubstantiality which suggests that by the time he got to the end he had left himself nothing solid to work with" (Woolf 1994, 219).

Over time, as the living creature it is, the essay has adapted itself to the new social circumstances. Initially, these texts were long, dealt with serious matters and were addressed to an elite, "a public which had not only time to sit down to its magazine seriously, but a high, if peculiarly Victorian, standard of culture by which to judge it" (Woolf 1994, 219).

Nevertheless, there was a change from this small audience to a wider public who were not so cultivated, which could be described as a "reversion to the classic type" of essay practiced by Addison and Lamb (Woolf 1994, 220). Woolf provides the examples of Augustine Birrell (1850-1933) and Max Beerbohm (1872-1956) to illustrate this tendency, in such a manner that

> As the conditions change so the essayist, most sensitive of all plants to public opinion, adapts himself, and if he is good makes the best of the change, and if he is bad the worst. Mr Birrell is certainly good; and so we find that, though he has dropped a considerable amount of weight, his attack is much more direct and his movement more supple. But what did Mr Beerbohm give to the essay and what did he take from it? That is a much more complicated question, for here we have an essayist who has concentrated on the work and is without doubt the prince of his profession. (Woolf 1994, 220)

Woolf argues that a good essayist, such as Beerbohm, must "give himself" and place himself in a position that is equal to that of the readers, who are now "familiarly addressed by a voice which seemed to belong to a man no larger than themselves" (220). By doing so, the essayist "has brought personality into literature", a possibility the essay, as a flexible genre, allows (Woolf 1994, 220).

Again, Virginia Woolf emphasises that the author must know how to write, because it is only in this way "that you can make use in literature of your self" (Woolf 1994, 221). Despite the fact that essayists such as Mr Beerbohm fulfil the requirements in order to excel at what they do, "it would be foolish, unhappily, to make him, the artist, the man who gives us only his best, the representative of our age" (Woolf 1994, 221). In other words, however skilled he was, he belongs to a different period of time, and "the drawing-room table", where essays used to be read at this period, "begins to look rather like an altar where, once upon a time, people deposited offerings" (Woolf 1994, 221).

As Woolf indicates, the conditions have changed, and the public demands essays even more than ever before (222). The "I" has become the "we", and the essayist "must masquerade", as "he cannot afford the time either to be himself or to be other people. He must skim the surface of thought and dilute the strength of personality". Woolf concludes by saying that contemporary essayists share

> [...] the contemporary dilemma — that lack of an obstinate conviction which lifts ephemeral sounds through the misty sphere of anybody's language to the land where there is a perpetual marriage, a perpetual union. Vague as all definitions are, a good essay must have this permanent quality about it; it must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in, not out. (Woolf 1994, 224).

2.5. "The Decay of Essay-writing" (1905)

Woolf explores here the peculiar nature of the personal essay, which goes back to Montaigne's *Essais* (1580 and 1588), which Woolf takes as her aesthetic model (Woolf 1986, 25; Luckhurst 1999, 49). The essay is so particular, among other reasons, because "you can say in this shape what you cannot with equal fitness say in any other" (Woolf 1986, 25). This freedom of expression, which is connected with the dialogic nature of Montaigne's essays, is one of Woolf's main preoccupations, as she writes in her diary on 17 August 1923: "I should graze nearer my own individuality, I should mitigate the pomposity & sweep in all sorts of

trifles. I think I should feel more at my ease" (Woolf 1981, 261; Luckhurst 1999, 50). This style is also perceived to be pleasurable by Woolf, and this is a fundamental requirement for any essay, as already explained.

In addition, "almost all essays begin with a capital I", which serves to distinguish them from "history or philosophy or biography" and to emphasise the fact that they convey a personal opinion (Woolf 1986, 25). As Woolf writes in "Montaigne" (1925): "this talking of oneself, following one's own vagaries, giving the whole map, weight, colour, and circumference of the soul in its confusion, its variety, its imperfection — this art belonged to one man only: to Montaigne" (Woolf 1994, 71).

The popularity of the essay is, therefore, intimately linked with "the fact that its proper use is to express one's personal peculiarities, so that under the decent veil of print one can indulge one's egoism to the full" (Woolf 1986, 26). In other words, the essay allows "the inscription of the self" which, in Woolf's case, is clearly a woman's. Nonetheless, "to write of one's self" is "a feat but seldom accomplished", which provokes that a considerable number of essays lacks "the cardinal virtue of sincerity", their authors being "inclined to run away or shade their eyes" (Woolf 1986, 26).

3. A Woman's Self: Towards *A Room of One's Own*

3.1. Woolf's Essays and Feminist Politics

The preceding pages have shown the relevance of the essay as a genre in Virginia Woolf's *oeuvre*, as well as the writer's conception of it as the expression of personal opinion, thus deviating from her male contemporaries' understanding of the genre as scientific prose. In so doing, Woolf addresses a community of "common readers" governed by the pleasure they find in literature. However, Woolf's essays also articulate her feminist politics, and she finds in the genre the perfect outlet to discuss the role of women in the public field, most notably

addressed in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Nevertheless, Woolf's feminist agenda can be traced back to earlier works which analyse women and their position in the literary field and society, which already anticipate some of the issues that will be central to *A Room of One's Own*.

In this way, Woolf expresses in the first lines of "Women Novelists" (1918) her dislike for the discrimination against women who devote themselves to the writing of novels, and praises Brimley Johnson for delivering his opinion "without this fatal bias" as well as for saying "interesting" things about the peculiarities of the literature written by women (Woolf 1987, 314). Woolf considers that, in order to approach this question properly, social history, in addition to literature, must be taken into account, which leads her to ask such questions as:

> What, for example, was the origin of the extraordinary outburst in the eighteenth century of novel writing by women? Why did it begin then, and not in the time of the Elizabethan renaissance? Was the motive which finally determined them to write a desire to correct the current view of their sex expressed in so many volumes and for so many ages by male writers? (Woolf 1987, 314)

But this "wish to redress a grievance" is not always what inspires women to write, as in the case of Frances Burney (1752-1840), "the mother of English fiction" (Woolf 1987, 314). What is perhaps more relevant than the real reason behind it is the fact that they had to confront considerable difficulties, as the case of several women writers illustrates. Thus, Frances Burney saw her manuscripts burnt, and needlework was imposed on her as a punishment (Woolf 1987, 315).

Similarly, authors such as Jane Austen, who "would slip her writing beneath a book if anyone came in", or Charlotte Brontë, who "stopped in the middle of her work to pare the potatoes", clearly show the extent to which women at the time found it difficult to dedicate themselves to novel writing (315). In addition to this "domestic" repression, there was still another important constraint, which was related to morals (Woolf 1987, 315). In this manner,

George Eliot was charged with "'coarseness and immorality'" for trying "'to familiarise the minds of our young women in the middle and higher ranks with matters on which their fathers and brothers would never venture to speak in their presence'" (Woolf 1987, 315).

In order to obtain freedom "from the tyranny of what was expected from their sex", several female authors, including George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë, adopted male pseudonyms, failing to realise, as Woolf seems to suggest in her essay, that they would be unable to liberate themselves "from a more fundamental tyranny – the tyranny of sex itself" (Woolf 1987, 315). Their attempt to gain freedom has negatively affected the women's writing, being the best writers, as Johnson points out (and Woolf appears to agree), those "exceptional women who imitated neither a sex nor any individual of either sex" (Woolf 1987, 315).

Woolf also seems to concur with Johnson in that "a woman's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine: the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine" (Woolf 1987, 316). For some, "feminine" means that "women are born preachers and always work for an ideal", or that they are not imaginative but satirical and humorous (Woolf 1987, 316).

Some of these concerns are further explored in "Women and Fiction" (1945), where the author raises questions such as: "Why […] was there no continuous writing done by women before the eighteenth century?" or "Why did they then write almost habitually as men", "and why did their art then […] take the form of fiction?" (Woolf 2009, 28). This is an extremely difficult question, the answer to which "is to be found […] – in those almost unlit corridors of history where the figures of generations of women are so dimly, so fitfully perceived" (Woolf 2009, 28).

The history of England is gender-biased, because it is that "of the male line, not of the female", as demonstrated by the fact that

> Of our fathers we know always some fact, some distinction. They were soldiers or they were sailors; they filled that office or they made that law. But of our mothers, our grandmothers, our great-grandmothers, what remains? Nothing but a tradition. One was beautiful; one was red-haired; one was kissed by a Queen. We know nothing of them except their names and the dates of their marriages and the number of children they bore. (Woolf 2009, 28)

Woolf further argues that "the extraordinary woman depends on the ordinary woman", in that only by knowing what life was like for the ordinary woman we can "account for the success or failure of the extraordinary woman as a writer" (29). This would include how many children she had, how much money did she possessed or "if she had a room to herself", which could be apprehended as an anticipation of *A Room of One's Own* (Woolf 2009, 29).

Woolf adopts a bitter and sardonic tone in what pertains to the analysis of the conditions that prevented women from writing at certain periods of history, such as the one represented by Elizabethan literature in the sixteenth century, which was solely masculine (29). Woolf puts the blame on "law and custom", sarcastically claiming that, since a woman was usually "beaten and flung about the room" in the fifteenth century in case she refused to marry "the man of her parents' choice, the spiritual atmosphere was not favourable to the production of works of art" (Woolf 2009, 29).

Therefore, if women were able, toward the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, to write fiction, this was due to "innumerable slight changes in law and customs and manners" (Woolf 2009, 30). Thus, women had now more leisure time and a better education, and they had acquired further freedom, since those belonging to the higher social classes were allowed to choose who to marry, or even to remain unmarried or not to have children, which granted them even more liberty (Woolf 2009, 30).

Woolf condemns the "considerable pressure" society placed on women to write novels, in such a way that "living as she did in the common sitting room, surrounded by

people, a woman was trained to use her mind in observation and upon the analysis of character. She was trained to be a novelist and not to be a poet" (30). These women were not given the opportunity to have "certain kinds of experience", being experience a key factor that has a considerable impact on fiction (Woolf 2009, 30).

Joseph Conrad's narratives, for instance, are primarily based on his experiences as a sailor, and Tolstoy's experience as a soldier informed his novel *War and Peace*, which "would be incredibly impoverished" if he had lacked knowledge about war (Woolf 2009, 30). Nothing of this was offered to women, who even saw their emotional life "strictly regulated by law and custom" (Woolf 2009, 31). A clear case in point would be that of George Eliot, who decided to live with Mr Lewes despite not being his wife, which caused a great deal of commotion in society. Tolstoy, on the other hand, "was living a free life as a soldier, with men and women of all classes, for which nobody censured him and from which his novels drew much of their astonishing breadth and vigour" (Woolf 2009, 31).

In addition to this "narrow range of the writer's experience", nineteenth-century novels were also characterized, according to Virginia Woolf, by "someone resenting the treatment of her sex and pleading for its rights" (31). This element is, in the author's view, utterly alien to men, unless they are working men or negroes, "or one who for some other reason is conscious of disability". However, this "introduces a distortion and is frequently the cause of weakness", and perhaps that is why Jane Austen or Emily Brontë refused to adopt this attitude, remaining "unperturbed by scorn or censure" (Woolf 2009, 31).

These writers embody the "change of attitude" that characterizes women's fiction at Woolf's time, when the writer is not bitter or angry or "pleading and protesting as she writes", but whose main focus is the novel itself, "without distraction from outside" (Woolf 2009, 32). As a consequence, a novel written by a woman is "far more genuine and far more interesting to-day than it was a hundred or even fifty years ago" (Woolf 2009, 32).

Despite the above said, a woman still has to overcome a number of problems so as to "write exactly as she wishes to write", such as the form of the sentence, "a sentence made by men", and therefore "too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use". A woman must then find a sentence that is suitable to express "her thought without crushing or distorting it". However, Woolf claims that this is "only a means to an end", which will be "reached only when a woman has the courage to surmount opposition and the determination to be true to herself" (Woolf 2009, 32).

Woolf believes that the different elements that conform a novel, which is "a statement about a thousand different objects – human, natural, divine", are ordered according to "the writer's vision", on the one hand, and to convention, on the other (Woolf 2009, 32). The problem is that, as men "have established an order of values in life […] since fiction is largely based on life, these values prevail there also to a very great extent" (Woolf 2009, 32). Consequently, women writers show a tendency to alter these values, and for this reason they will certainly be criticised (Woolf 2009, 32).

Nevertheless, as Woolf notes, women seem eventually to become "more independent of opinion", because now they "respect their own sense of values", which leads them to show a new interest toward other women, rather than focusing on themselves (Woolf 2009, 33). This is inextricably linked with the tendency of women from the early nineteenth century to use the novel as a tool "to expose their own suffering, to plead their own cause", as already explained. As a result, most novels written by women at this time were autobiographical (Woolf 2009, 33).

Once this need to communicate their situation has been overcome, women writers begin "to explore their own sex, to write of women as women have never been written of before; for of course, until very lately, women in literature were the creation of men" (Woolf 2009, 33). Perhaps this last statement, that "women in literature were the creation of men",

serves to illustrate one of the main ideas Woolf holds as regards women writers, and women in society as a whole, who are submitted to the authority of a male figure, be it their father, their brother or even a critic. Women's fiction at the present could then be characterized as follows:

> One would say that it is courageous; it is sincere; it keeps closely to what women feel. It is not bitter. It does not insist upon its femininity. But at the same time, a woman's book is not written as a man would write it. (Woolf 2009, 33)

Furthermore, it is important to note that there have been significant changes in society, in particular "the change which has turned the English woman from a nondescript influence, fluctuating and vague, to a voter, a wage earner, a responsible citizen" (Woolf 2009, 33). Because of this, a woman "must act for herself, and not merely influence the acts of others", which causes her novels to shift attention from the personal to the impersonal, becoming "more critical of society, and less analytical of individual lives" (Woolf 2009, 34).

This "impersonality" will be extremely relevant, as it "will encourage the poetic spirit, and it is in poetry that women's fiction is still weakest". Thus, "they will look beyond the personal and political relationships to the wider questions which the poet tries to solve - of our destiny and the meaning of life". Woolf appears to be placing considerable emphasis on the need for women to obtain money and leisure, because these will enable them to devote themselves to literature more than before, making "a fuller and a more subtle use of the instrument of writing" (Woolf 2009, 34).

"Women and fiction" ends with the author's prophesy that, "granted time and books and a little space in the house for herself, literature will become for women, as for men, an art to be studied", an idea which will be central in *A Room of One's Own* (Woolf 2009, 34). Woolf concludes that

> [...] if we may prophesy, women in time to come will write fewer novels, but better novels; and not novels only, but poetry and criticism and history. But in this, to be sure, one is looking ahead to that golden, that perhaps fabulous age when women will have what has so long been denied them - leisure, and money, and a room to themselves. (Woolf 2009, 35)

The concluding lines of this passage already anticipate, both in terms of ideas and imagery, major elements in *A Room of One's Own*, in particular Woolf's emphasis on the need of women to have "a room to themselves" so as to be able to write. As we shall see, Woolf will depart from biological explanations of women's inferior nature, and will rather place the emphasis on material (economic, cultural and social) impediments to explore the effects of poverty and exclusion on women's public achievement. Before this, however, let's say a few words about another influential essay, "Professions for Women".

This was part of a conference she delivered in the National Society for Women's Service on 21 January 1931. Here, Woolf recounts the obstacles that she was made to confront in order to become a writer. The most important of these was what she calls 'The Angel in the House', "who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews" (Woolf 1993, 102). Since the audience, due to their youth, may not have heard about this "phantom", Woolf intends to provide a brief description of it.

'The Angel in the House' would be a woman who is "intensely sympathetic", "immensely charming" and "utterly unselfish", and excellent "in the difficult arts of family life" (Woolf 1993, 102). She is a self-sacrificing woman who "was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others" (Woolf 1993, 102). This seems to be a crucial point not only in this essay, but also, and most importantly, in Woolf's conception of women as a whole, as she appears to be highlighting the impossibility for women to develop any concern about themselves owing to the roles imposed on them by society as one of the main hindrances to their liberation both in social and in literary terms.

Woolf advocates the death of this ideal woman of the Victorian period whose purity is unmatched and who would warn the woman writer to "be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive" when reviewing a book written by a man, thus preventing anyone from knowing that she has a mind of her own (Woolf 1993, 102). This may be related to the writer's own personal experience at an early stage in her career, when, as already mentioned, she had to confront censorship, in particular in *The Guardian*, where she worked from 1904 to 1909.

Therefore, Woolf resolves to kill 'The Angel in the House', acting "in self-defence", because, as she claims, "had I not killed her she would have killed me" (Woolf 1993, 103). She further expresses that

> She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must - to put it bluntly - tell lies if they are to succeed. (Woolf 1993, 103)

Woolf acknowledges that, despite being a difficult struggle, as "it is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality", killing the Angel in the House "was part of the occupation of a woman writer" (Woolf 1993, 103). In other words, it was a requirement if women were to prosper in their professional careers. Moreover, the author notes another relevant impediment for women writers, which is "the consciousness of what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions", which awakes them from the "trance", from the "artist's state of unconsciousness" which is necessary to write (Woolf 1993, 105). Woolf believes that she has overcome the first difficulty by killing the Angel in the House, but she does not think the same regarding the second one, that is, "telling the truth about my own experiences as a body" (105). She considers that a long process is needed before a woman can write free from constraints and prejudices, "before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against" (Woolf 1993, 105).

Woolf concludes her argument by recognising that, in spite of the adversities and the "many phantoms and obstacles [...] looming" in a woman's way, considerable progress has been made (105). At this point, she addresses her audience directly and, in particular, the women, because, as she says, "you have won rooms of your own in the house hitherto exclusively owned by men" (Woolf 1993, 106). However, as there is still a long way to go, she invites women to "furnish" and "decorate" this new room, the symbol of their independence, and to decide with whom and in what conditions they are going to share it (106).

3.2. Women, Fiction and *A Room of One's Own*

This section focuses on *A Room of One's Own* (1929), perhaps the most well-known essay of those written by Virginia Woolf. It is in fact a book which contains two papers which were read as part of a conference at Newnham College (Oxford) and Girton in October 1928 (Woolf 1945, 5). It is probably the author's most famous essay and certainly one of Woolf's most influential ones in terms of her feminist agenda. The narrative's abrupt opening (*in media res*) serves as a declaration of intentions, in that it establishes the general tone of the text and paves the ground for further reflections upon the topic of "women and fiction", a major concern for Woolf throughout her career as a writer. This is how Woolf decides to begin:

> BUT, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction - what has that got to do with a room of one's own? I will try to explain. When you asked me to speak about women and fiction I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant. [...] The title women and fiction might mean [...] women and what they are like; or it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them [...]. (Woolf 1945, 5)

This is an extremely unusual manner to begin an essay, especially at this time, which clearly demonstrates how Woolf's conception of the genre differed significantly from that

which most of her male contemporaries held. Thus, the writer acknowledges that she will only be able to achieve partial, subjective conclusions, therefore rejecting universal truths, as the narrator claims:

> I should never be able to come to a conclusion. I should never be able to fulfil what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer - to hand you after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece for ever. All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point - a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved. (Woolf 1945, 5)

The above quoted passage shows Woolf's suspicion of these "nuggets of pure truth" that any lecturer is supposed to deliver to the audience. Moreover, Woolf seems to be actively inviting her audience to respond to her essay by engaging in an attempt to find an answer to the "unsolved" problems which the terms "women" and "fiction" - and the relationship between the two - imply.

Therefore, the essayist (or lecturer) can only "give an opinion upon one minor point", and here Woolf's irony is clear, since the fact that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" is anything but "a minor point" (Woolf 1945, 6). On the contrary, it could be argued that the necessity of women to have money and a room of one's own is echoed throughout the whole essay, thus remaining backbone of it.

Because of the narrator's own acknowledged inability to come to a conclusion about these two topics (women and fiction), Woolf wishes "to make some amends" by sharing with the audience "the train of thought" that led her to think that money and an independent space are essential in order for women to write fiction (Woolf 1945, 6). Once again, the narrator admits that truth is unattainable, in particular when controversial issues, "and any question about sex is that", are addressed. As a consequence, the lecturer can only aspire to give the audience "the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker" (Woolf 1945, 6).

By doing so, Woolf places herself at the same level of the reader, rather than assuming a position of authority, as salient critics of the time, notably T.S. Eliot, usually did. In addition, the fact that the lecturer gives the audience "the chance of drawing their own conclusions" may well be related with the dialogic nature of the essay, especially in connection with Montaigne's conception of the genre, which has already been explained.

In this way, the narrator informs the audience about the reflections that had occupied her mind during the two days prior to her arrival there and, in so doing, continues to break with conventions by explicitly stating that what she intends to tell is utterly fictional, thus placing the emphasis on subjectivity and fictionalisation:

> I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence; Oxbridge is an invention; so is Fernham; 'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping. If not, you will of course throw the whole of it into the waste-paper basket and forget all about it. (Woolf 1945, 6)

Again, Woolf demands an active role from her audience, who is warned, if we may say that, about the speaker's unreliability, which is absolutely revolutionary as far as the nature of the essay as a genre is concerned. Therefore, it depends on the reader to "seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping". In case readers find nothing of real interest, they are free to erase the story from their memories, which, once more, contradicts major prescriptions of the genre.

In tune with that, Woolf assumes a fictional identity to tell the story: "Call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please - it is not a matter of any importance" (Woolf 1945, 6). This character finds herself haunted by a thought which, "put back into the mind, [...] became at once very exciting, and important; and as it darted and sank, and flashed hither and thither, set up such a wash and tumult of ideas that it was impossible to sit still" (Woolf 1945, 7).

Woolf continues:

> It was thus that I found myself walking with extreme rapidity across a grass plot. Instantly *a man's figure rose to intercept me.* Nor did I at first understand that the gesticulations of a curious-looking object, in a cut-away coat and evening shirt, were aimed at me. His face expressed horror and indignation; *he was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me.* (Woolf 1945, 7; emphasis mine)

This is a crucial passage, because it contains some of the key issues that Woolf addresses in *A Room of One's Own*, in particular women's exclusion from spaces which are directly connected with culture and knowledge. This idea is reinforced by another episode, in which the protagonist is again rebuffed, this time when she attempts to go into the college library in order to see the manuscript of Milton's *Lycidas*, about which Charles Lamb had written an essay, as well as Thackeray's *Esmond*:

> But here I was actually at the door which leads into the library itself. I must have opened it, for instantly there issued, like a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings, a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman, who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction. (Woolf 1945, 9)

Women are not allowed into the library, which further emphasises the difficulties they must face if they are to access knowledge and to enjoy the possibility of accomplishing whatever goals they may have in life. Furthermore, they are submitted to a man's authority, which Woolf appears to be strongly criticising. Therefore, women need to acquire freedom and independence in order to develop their own skills and gain further relevance in public achievement, as the narrator sardonically writes in chapter 2: "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (Woolf 1945, 37).

Despite the narrator's anger and frustration for being excluded from the library and, by extension, from being granted access to universal knowledge, she admits that

> That a famous library has been cursed by a woman is a matter of complete indifference to a famous library. Venerable and calm, with all its treasures safe locked within its breast, it sleeps complacently and will, so far as I am concerned, so sleep for ever. Never will I wake those echoes, never will I ask for that hospitality again, I vowed as I descended the steps in anger. (Woolf 1945, 10)

The issue of the narrative voice is essential to understand Woolf's feminist agenda in *A Room of One's Own*. In this part of the text, the narrator refers to herself by using the impersonal pronoun "one": "Still an hour remained before luncheon, and what was one to do?" (Woolf 1945, 10). This confers to the essay a quality of universality, in the sense that the sentence may apply to any women writer regardless of their circumstances, which is in tune with Woolf's rejection of the conventions of the essay, in particular the authority of the narrative "I".

One of the major arguments in the text relates to how material conditions are intrinsically linked to public achievement and, as the essay proves, the lack of financial resources seriously reduces women's possibilities to become writers, mathematicians or anthropologists (Woolf 1945, 22): "What had our mothers been doing then that they had no wealth to leave us? Powdering their noses? Looking in at shop windows? Flaunting in the sun at Monte Carlo?" (Woolf 1945, 22).

As the narrator suggests, poverty lies at the heart of women's position of disadvantage in cultural and social terms, which severely limits their choices in life:

> If only Mrs Seton and her mother and her mother before her had learnt the great art of making money and had left their money, like their father and their grandfathers before them, to found fellowships and lectureships and prizes and scholarships appropriated to the use of their own sex, we might have dined very tolerably up here alone off a bird and a bottle of wine; we might have looked forward without undue confidence to a pleasant and honourable lifetime spent in the shelter of one of the liberally endowed professions. We might have been exploring or writing; mooning about the venerable places of the earth; sitting contemplative on the steps of the Parthenon, or going at ten to an office and coming home comfortably at half past four to write a little poetry. (23)

However, the narrator eventually accepts that there is no point in asking these questions because, even if these women had managed to earn some money, which was impossible for them, "the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned" (Woolf 1945, 24). In spite of this, these issues will remain in the narrator's mind, who "pondered why it was that Mrs Seton had no money to leave us; and what effect poverty has on the mind; [...] and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out", these last words alluding to her exclusion from the library (Woolf 1945, 25). Women's disadvantageous financial position directly conditions their cultural and material accomplishments. This, metaphorically speaking, is also addressed by the narrator at the beginning of chapter two, when commenting on the material conditions of male and female colleges in Oxbridge, which she exemplifies by referring to the poor luncheon she shares with other women in their college:

> That visit to Oxbridge and the luncheon and the dinner had started a swarm of questions. Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art? (Woolf 1945, 27)

3.3. A Visit to the British Museum

Women's position of cultural inferiority is not only exemplified by the narrator's visit to Oxbridge, but also comprises other venerable institutions which have been traditionally regarded as repositories of knowledge. In the second chapter of *A Room of One's Own*, the narrator tries to find answers to these questions by visiting the British Museum, because, "if truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where, I asked myself, picking up a notebook and a pencil, is truth?" (Woolf 1945, 27).

When she gets into the building and is given the chance to look at the lists of books, she is overwhelmed by “stupefaction, wonder, and bewilderment” to discover that the number of books written by men about women exceeds by far those written by women about men (Woolf 1945, 28). The narrator is fascinated by “this curious disparity” (29), which will give rise to a significantly higher amount of unsolved questions, most of them connected with women’s poverty and their construction as inferior with respect to the other sex.

While absorbed by her task, the narrator regrets not having had the opportunity to go to university, which would have considerably eased the process, and she compares herself with a student “who has been trained in research at Oxbridge”, and “has no doubt some method of shepherding his question past all distractions till it runs into its answer as a sheep runs into its pen” (Woolf 1945, 29). The narrator begins to examine the books and read what some prominent male writers of different periods of time thought about women. Pope, for instance, considered that “most women have no character at all”, while Napoleon thought them incapable of education (Woolf 1945, 31). Some go even as far as to claim that they are deprived of a soul, whereas others, such as the ancient Germans, “maintain that women are half divine and worship them on that account” (Woolf 1945, 31). One of those who do not hold women in high regard is the author of “*The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex*”, Professor von X, whose description of women incites the narrator’s anger: “My heart had leapt. My cheek had burnt. I had flushed with anger” (Woolf 1945, 33).

This leads the narrator to start an inquiry regarding the origin of the strong hatred that such professors feel towards women: “How explain the anger of the professors? Why were they angry?” (Woolf 1945, 34). While attempting to solve this mystery, the narrator finds a place to have lunch and reads “the evening paper”, after which she thinks that “the most transient visitor to this planet [...] who picked up this paper could not fail to be aware, even

from this scattered testimony, that England is under the rule of a patriarchy" (Woolf 1945, 35). Thus, it is men, somehow represented by the "professor", who have the power in society:

> Nobody in their senses could fail to detect the dominance of the professor. His was the power and the money and the influence. He was the proprietor of the paper and its editor and sub-editor. He was the Foreign Secretary and the Judge. He was the cricketer; he owned the racehorses and the yachts. He was the director of the company that pays two hundred per cent to its shareholders. He left millions to charities and colleges that were ruled by himself. (Woolf 1945, 35)

The reason why these powerful men should be angry remains unclear for the narrator, who wonders whether, perhaps, anger is "the familiar, the attendant sprite on power" (Woolf 1945, 36). As rich people fear that the poor may wish to deprive them of their wealth, "the professor, or patriarchs, as it might be more accurate to call them, might be angry for that reason partly" (Woolf 1945, 36). There may be, nevertheless, an additional and more submerged reason for this: it is not that they want to attack women, but that they need to feel superior in order to reinforce their confidence in themselves, being this fundamental for both men and women, because "life for both sexes [...] is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle", and "without self-confidence we are as babes in the cradle" (Woolf 1945, 36).

One possible manner in which to increase one's self-confidence is "by feeling that one has some innate superiority [...] over other people" (Woolf 1945, 36). This, as a consequence, would be "one of the chief sources" of the patriarch's power, who would accuse any woman of being an "arrant feminist" simply "for making a possibly true if uncomplimentary statement about the other sex" (Woolf 1945, 37). Women are prevented from speaking the truth, which seriously damages the "vanity" of men and their "power" to believe in themselves (Woolf 1945, 37).

As notable historical figures such as Napoleon and Mussolini, who both despised women, prove, men need to "insist [...] upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge" (Woolf 1945, 37). Here Woolf sardonically comments

that “women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (Woolf 1945, 37). Women are denied the possibility of telling the truth “without giving far more pain and rousing far more anger than a man would do [...] For is she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished” (Woolf 1945, 37).

Woolf continues to use a sarcastic tone when she asks: “How is he to go on giving judgement, civilizing natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is?”, being the sarcasm more salient in the allusion to the civilizing of natives, which may be regarded as a critique to imperialism (Woolf 1945, 37). Men’s lives are ruled by self-deception, by an illusion which, even if unreal, grants them “that self-confidence, that self-assurance, which have had such profound consequences in public life and lead to such curious notes in the margin of the private mind” (Woolf 1945, 38).

Following these reflections, the narrator mentions her aunt, Mary Beton, who has recently passed away and has left her “five hundred pounds a year for ever”, which the narrator celebrates (Woolf 1945, 39). One of the most controversial passages in *A Room of One’s Own* relates to the narrator’s consideration of women’s suffrage which, however, has to be understood within the larger context of the essay, which clearly illustrates how material conditions directly affect women’s cultural and social achievement. According to the narrator, money is more important than the right to vote, since economic resources provide women, among other things, with “food, house, and clothing” (Woolf 1945, 39).

Prior to this, the narrator explains how she, as many other women, performed a number of harsh unfulfilling jobs so as to earn a living. In this manner, “addressing envelopes, reading to old ladies, making artificial flowers, teaching the alphabet to small children in a kindergarten [...] were the chief occupations that were open to women before

1918" (Woolf 1945, 39). Once they have a fixed income, women begin to adopt a new attitude towards men, not feeling neither hatred nor the need to flatter them (Woolf 1945, 39). Instead, the narrator is capable of perceiving that "they too, the patriarchs, the professors, had endless difficulties, terrible drawbacks to contend with" (Woolf 1945, 40). Even though they may have "power and money", this was

> [...] at the cost of harbouring in their breasts an eagle, a vulture [...] the instinct for possession, the rage of acquisition which drives them to desire other people's fields and goods perpetually; to make frontiers and flags; battleships and poison gas; to offer up their own lives and their children's lives. (Woolf 1945, 40)

Woolf seems to be condemning the men's need to acquire unlimited wealth and impose their authority over others, which may lead them "to make frontiers and flags; battleships and poison gas; to offer up their own lives and their children's lives", that is, to war, which is, consequently, a male construction (Woolf 1945, 40).

It is only when such basic needs as "food, house and clothing" have been covered that women can concentrate their attention and efforts on different activities, in such a way that "by degrees fear and bitterness modified themselves into pity and toleration; and then in a year or two, pity and toleration went, and the greatest release of all came, which is freedom to think of things in themselves" (Woolf 1945, 40). Now, women can admire the beauty of a building, a picture, or ponder the quality of a book (Woolf 1945, 40). In fact, Woolf finishes this chapter by asserting that women will eventually "take part in all the activities and exertions that were once denied them" (Woolf 1945, 41), as the narrator further expresses:

> The nursemaid will heave coal. The shopwoman will drive an engine. All assumptions founded on the facts observed when women were the protected sex will have disappeared [...] Remove that protection, expose them to the same exertions and activities, make them soldiers and sailors and engine-drivers and dock labourers, and will not women die off so much younger, so much quicker, than men that one will say, 'I saw a woman today', as one used to say, 'I saw an aeroplane'. Anything may happen when womanhood has ceased to be a protected occupation [...] (Woolf 1945, 42)

3.4. The Representation of Women in Fiction: Judith Shakespeare

Still unsatisfied with the preliminary outcome of her research, the narrator continues to investigate in the next chapter in what conditions women lived "not throughout the ages, but in England, say in the time of Elizabeth" (Woolf 1945, 43). In order to do so, she reads some history books, beginning with Professor Trevelyan's *History of England*, where she learns that, around 1470, "wife-beating [...] was a recognized right of man", and that "the daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parents' choice was liable to be locked up, beaten and flung about the room, without any shock being inflicted on public opinion" (Woolf 1945, 43).

At the Stuart period, women, even those belonging to the "the upper and middle class", were denied the right to choose who they wished to marry, "and when the husband had been assigned, he was lord and master, so far at least as law and custom could make him" (Woolf 1945, 44). Nevertheless, Professor Trevelyan acknowledges that "neither Shakespeare's women nor those of authentic seventeenth-century memoirs [...] seem wanting in personality and character", an assertion which the narrator concurs with. She elaborates on this view by claiming that "women have burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of time", citing such names as Cleopatra, Emma Bovary, Antigone or Anna Karenina, among others (44).

At this point, the narrator calls the reader's attention to the paradoxical situation of women: they are "of the utmost importance" in the literature written by men, but "completely insignificant" in real life (45), as she puts it:

> If woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance; very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater. But this is woman in fiction. In fact, as Professor Trevelyan points out, she was locked up, beaten and flung about the room. (45)

Consequently, whereas women had served as an important source of inspiration in poetry, the reality was that they could read only with difficulties and were the property of their husbands (45). Given these circumstances, it seems reasonable to go deeper into the particular material conditions of women “but not losing sight of fiction either” in order to understand their predicament. This is what the narrator wishes to do, but she is confronted with serious difficulties, especially “by the scarcity of facts”, because “one knows nothing detailed, nothing perfectly true and substantial” about the Elizabethan woman (46).

Due to the lack of information about women in history books, such as the average number of children they usually had, whether they had a room for themselves or what were their houses like, the narrator encourages students to “rewrite history”, thus adding “a supplement” to it, which should be given “some inconspicuous name so that women might figure there without impropriety” (47). There is clearly a sardonic emphasis in the last part of the sentence, which the narrator uses to condemn the ideal of the Angel in the House and the prominence of propriety as a value often associated to women in the past.

In order to illustrate this point, the narrator poses forward one of the most imaginative and powerful metaphors of women’s exclusion through the character of the fictional Judith Shakespeare. The narrator argues that, if Shakespeare had had “a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith”, the material conditions of Elizabethan England would have prevented her from accomplishing the same prominence of her brother in literary terms (48). In this manner, while Shakespeare would have been able to receive a proper education, learning “the elements of grammar and logic”, and attend the theatre on a regular basis, and then becoming “a successful actor [...] and even getting access to the palace of the queen”, his sister, however talented she may be, would have probably stayed at home (48).

Put differently, she would not have been offered the same opportunities regarding education, thus having “no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace

and Virgil" (49). Moreover, most of her time would have been devoted to the domestic chores, such as "to mend the stockings or mind the stew", and she would have been forced to marry a man towards whom she did not feel any love. In case she would have refused, she would have been "severely beaten by her father", who would have asked her "not to shame him in this matter of her marriage" (49). In the end, because of the impossibility to fulfil her aspirations as an individual, Shakespeare's sister would have possibly committed suicide (50). In other words, "any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at" (51).

The narrator highlights that the immense obstacles that a male writer had to overcome to produce a work of literature (both material and immaterial) are multiplied in the case of women (54). Thus, a woman lacked a space for her own, and her money, "which depended on the goodwill of her father, was only enough to keep her clothed" (54). However, even more "formidable" were the "immaterial" difficulties, since "the indifference of the world which Keats and Flaubert and other men of genius have found so hard to bear was in her case not indifference but hostility" (54).

In addition to this, "there was an enormous body of masculine opinion to the effect that nothing could be expected of women intellectually" (55). The narrator's conclusion is that women were not encouraged (on the contrary, they were "snubbed, slapped, lectured, and exhorted") to become artists "even in the nineteenth century" (56).

3.5. Women, Fiction and Class

One of the major issues which the narrator explores in *A Room of One's Own* is the progressive visibility of women in the nineteenth century, especially of those belonging to the middle and upper classes, who begin to prove "that money could be made by writing at the

sacrifice, perhaps, of certain agreeable qualities; and so by degrees writing became not merely a sign of folly and a distracted mind, but was of practical importance" (65). This is the case of Aphra Behn, "a woman forced by the death of her husband and some unfortunate adventures of her own to make her living by her wits" (64). This is essential for women's process of emancipation, as it provides them with a means of survival. As Woolf says, "money dignifies what is frivolous if unpaid for" (65). In this way,

> Hundreds of women began as the eighteenth century drew on to add to their pin money, or to come to the rescue of their families by making translations or writing the innumerable bad novels which have ceased to be recorded even in text-books, but are to be picked up in the fourpenny boxes in the Charing Cross Road. (65)

A crucial change came about, which, according to the author, is "of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle-class women began to write" (66). It is now that the number of books written by women commences to increase. Nevertheless, the narrator wonders why there are almost exclusively novels in the shelves: "But why, I could not help asking, as I ran my eyes over them, were they, with very few exceptions, all novels?" (66). The fact that less concentration is necessary to write fiction than poetry or drama may be a possible explanation, as women did not have neither the time nor the space required in order to produce poetry (67). It may also be connected with their social extraction as middle-class women, and with the fact that "her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room. People's feelings were impressed on her; personal relations were always before her eyes" (67).

Woolf considers it a miracle that such great novels as *Wuthering Heights*, *Pride and Prejudice* or *Jane Eyre* were written under these circumstances (70). In this sense, she wonders "what might have happened if Charlotte Brontë had possessed say three hundred a year" (70). In her own words,

> We must accept the fact that all these good novels [...] were written by women without more experience of life than could enter the house of a respectable clergyman; written too in the common sitting-room of that respectable house and by women so poor that they could not afford to buy more than a few quires of paper at a time upon which to write *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre*. (70)

Subsequently, the narrator analyses how Brontë's feelings of anger are reflected in some passages of *Jane Eyre*, from what follows that novels often reflect to a certain extent "real life" (74). Nonetheless, the values of women are very different from those of men, which prevail. Thus, "speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important'; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial'. And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction" (74). As a result, a book is "important" if its topic is war; if its matter is "the feelings of women in a drawing-room", then it is regarded as "insignificant" (74). The narrator points out, in this sense, how many women were influenced by these values and the criticism they would face if they did not "alter its clear vision in deference to external authority" (74).

Woolf believes this to be a serious "flaw" in a novel, as the writers were "thinking of something other than the thing itself", changing their values "in deference to the opinion of others" (75). Only Jane Austen and Emily Brontë "wrote as woman write, not as men write" (75).

> They alone were deaf to that persistent voice, now grumbling, now patronizing, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now angry, now avuncular, that voice which cannot let women alone, but must be at them, like some too conscientious governess, adjuring them, like Sir Egerton Brydges, to be refined. (75)

Woolf also emphasises another obstacle that women must overcome, which is even more relevant than that of the ideology. This is the absence of a tradition of female writers, which brings about, in turn, the lack of a suitable language for women to write: "The weight, the pace, the stride of a man's mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully" (76). Therefore, women are unable, as men did, to use the linguistic conventions that were usual at the time. Men writers at the beginning of the nineteenth

century tended to use a sentence which was unequivocally that of a male, in Woolf's view, and it would be something like what follows:

> The grandeur of their works was an argument with them, not to stop short, but to proceed. They could have no higher excitement or satisfaction than in the exercise of their art and endless generation of truth and beauty. Success prompts to exertion; and habit facilitates success. (77)

This is "a man's sentence", therefore "unsuited for a woman's use". It was Jane Austen who "devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use and never departed from it" (77). In addition, the novel was the most convenient genre to use because of its flexibility, which may be an additional reason why women wrote mostly novels.

3.6. Chloe Liked Olivia for the First Time in History: Women's Sorority

The turn of the twentieth century brought about a significant improvement of women's social and cultural conditions to the point of allowing them to write almost as many books as men (79). They also begin to address a variety of subjects and to use different genres, being no longer restricted to the novel. In this way,

> There are poems and plays and criticism; there are histories and biographies, books of travel and books of scholarship and research; there are even a few philosophies and books about science and economics. And though novels predominate, novels themselves may very well have changed from association with books of a different feather. (79)

The narrator picks up Mary Carmichael's *Life's Adventure* from the shelf and, even though at first she believes "that something was not quite in order", she is bewildered to discover that there is a reference to the sexual attraction between two women: "Chloe liked Olivia" (81). This signifies a radical change in the traditional way of representing women in literature, who "almost without exception [...] are shown in their relation to men" (82). In this manner, "all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex" (82). Rather than presenting women as

rivals or as objects of men's sexual desire, the closeness which Chloe and Olivia seem to enjoy signals the existence of collaborative bonds among them which will pave the way for the existence of an emancipatory discourse for women, an idea which will become central to late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century feminist thought.

As the knowledge men may have of women can sometimes be "terribly hampered and partial", the picture of women in fiction was, at least until the nineteenth century, when "woman becomes much more various and complicated", indeed limited (82). In Carmichael's novel, on the other hand, a more accurate and full portrait of women is provided, presenting them as individuals having "other interests besides the perennial interests of domesticity". Such is the case of Chloe and Olivia, who share a laboratory and wish to find "a cure for pernicious anaemia" (83).

These new writers, such as Carmichael, "will light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been", thus illumining aspects of women that have been hitherto denied or misrepresented (84). In this manner, "there are so many new facts for her to observe" that "she will not need to limit herself any longer to the respectable houses of the upper middle classes" (88). This is the only way through which "to see these women as they are", rather than as the other sex has traditionally portrayed them (88).

Woolf finishes by admitting that, despite not being highly talented, Mary Carmichael "did not do so badly", especially given the circumstances in which she had to write, "in a bed-sitting-room, without enough of those desirable things, time, money, and idleness" (93). Woolf foretells that

> [...] give her a room of her own and five hundred a year, let her speak her mind and leave out half that she now puts in, and she will write a better book one of these days. She will be a poet, I said, putting *Life's Adventure*, by Mary Carmichael, at the end of the shelf, in another hundred years' time. (93)

3.7. Woolf's "Androgynous Mind" and the Feminist Project

In the last chapter, the narrator develops the theory of the androgynous mind, quoting Coleridge, who said that "a great mind is androgynous" (97). The narrator reflects upon the meaning of this statement, putting forward the possibility that what the poet meant was that

> The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. (97)

Therefore, it is only in the fusion of the feminine and the masculine that the great mind can create. The problem, in the narrator's understanding, "is that virility has now become self-conscious—men, that is to say, are now writing only with the male side of their brains" (100). As a consequence, "some of the finest works of our greatest living writers fall upon deaf ears" owing to the women's incapability to interpret them, because "the emotion with which these books are permeated is to a woman incomprehensible" (100). They lack "suggestive power", as "the emotion which is so deep, so subtle, so symbolical to a man moves a woman to wonder" (101).

Following this line of thought, writers must combine both masculine and feminine traits if they are to produce good pieces of literature, being "fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" (102). This "marriage of opposites" is seen as a requirement "before the act of creation can be accomplished" (103). Woolf's proposal of the artist's "androgynous mind" has been, however, contested by some feminist authors. In *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) - whose title parodies Woolf's seminal title essay - American critic Elaine Showalter sees this as a betrayal to the feminist project, due to Woolf's rejection of the body. However, later feminists, such as Toril Moi, signal in *Feminist Literary Theory* (1985) the radical nature of Woolf's proposal, which would eventually entail the transcendence of binary

oppositions such as “male” versus “female”, which have traditionally articulated Western thought.

Woolf herself resumes the narration here and quotes Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, the professor of Literature at the college, to defend the emphasis that she has placed upon material things. As the professor explains,

> The poor poet has not in these days, nor has had for two hundred years, a dog’s chance [...] a poor child in England has little more hope than had the son of an Athenian slave to be emancipated into that intellectual freedom of which great writings are born. (106)

From this follows, in Woolf’s view, that “intellectual freedom depends upon material things” and “poetry depends upon intellectual freedom”. As a result, poetry depends upon material things, and women have been poor “from the beginning of time” (106). “That is why”, Woolf says, “I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one’s own”. In spite of this, as she acknowledges, some progress has been achieved, and “these evils are in the way to be bettered”.

Woolf encourages the women in the audience “to write all kinds of books, hesitating at no subject however trivial or however vast”, since this “will certainly profit the art of fiction” (107). The essay finishes with the writer’s exhortation to women, in which she refers back to Shakespeare’s sister who, despite dying young and never writing a word, “lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed” (111). Woolf believes that

> If we live another century or so [...] and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms or our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; [...] if we face the fact, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and

women, then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. (112)

Conclusions

This dissertation has aimed to prove how Woolf's ideas concerning feminism and gender have been consistent in her whole writing practice and, most notably, in her essays. To do so, I have examined some of Woolf's most representative and well-known essays, particularly those where her views on women figure more prominently, such as "Professions for Women" (1942) and *A Room of One's Own* (1929). By doing so, Woolf's conceptualization of the essay genre has been examined, thus showing, as was the subsidiary purpose of this work, the ways in which Woolf's practice deviated from the generally accepted views of the genre as an expression of scientific prose serving the purpose of instructing the reader. In opposition, and in Michel de Montaigne's wake, Woolf believed that the aim of the essay was not to convey truth, but to communicate with a reader who approaches literature to obtain pleasure. In this sense, the opening of *A Room of One's Own* questions some major conventions of the genre, while already positing the arguments which account for women's position of inferiority, directly derived from the lack of a space of their own and the opportunity to enjoy the independence and economic means required to write.

The formal restriction of a dissertation such as this has prevented me from approaching a number of related issues, such as the opposition and social ostracism which Woolf actually encountered as a result of her views on women and the role of patriarchy in their social invisibility, or Woolf's influence on other women writers who write in her wake until today. I am convinced that these could be the subject of further research in the future, thus providing a more complete portrayal of Virginia Woolf as a writer, whose works remain relevant as the twenty-first century moves forward.

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